

Research reveals people may prefer a utilitarian choice from the government on crisis management

Submitted by: BlueSky Public Relations Ltd

Wednesday, 25 March 2020

When faced with a moral dilemma, people usually respond in one of three ways, and the moral decision changes according to the setting, reveals recent research from Hebrew University of Jerusalem, UCL School of Management, and Harvard University.

The work by Professors Netta Barak-Corren, Chia-Jung Tsay, Fiery Cushman, and Max Bazerman, reveals that people may tackle an ethical problem by using the utilitarian principle, action principle, or intention principle.

The utilitarian principle evaluates actions based on their net benefit and seeks to maximise the good; the action principle prohibits any harmful reaction regardless of its consequences, positing that activity causing harm is worse than passively allowing it. The intention principle prohibits actions that are intended to bring harm, especially if those actions intend to use a person as a means to an end.

The study presented a scenario, where a runaway train is headed toward a group of people. Their lives can be spared, but only at the expense of another individual's life. The researchers then asked the participants what they would choose to do in a joint evaluation setting with two sets of railroad tracks.

18 per cent of participants said they would flip a switch to divert the train to a different track, killing one individual but saving three. This reflects the intention principle as it involves unintended but foreseen harm, but is accepted as it yields a better outcome.

37 per cent said they would take no action at all, as any other choice would bring harm to an individual, whereas inaction merely allows harm to occur – an example of the action principle.

However, 45 per cent said they would take a utilitarian approach and sacrifice the life of one to save the many, as this is the best outcome. They would use a switch that would drop an individual in front of a train to prevent it from hitting people, killing one person but saving five lives.

“We adopted a simple method to examine how people make moral decisions. It depends on the person's intuition and if all their options are laid out on the table at the same time. If they are evaluating their options individually, then the intention principle was the most popular; in contrast, if they are evaluating all of their options together, then the utilitarian principle gained more support, even if that option is more aversive,” says Professor Chia-Jung Tsay.

“Across our work, the utilitarian option had the highest support when participants chose among multiple options. This suggests that when faced with multiple policies to address crisis situations, people may prefer the option that saves the most lives, even if that option is more aversive,” says Professor Chia-Jung Tsay.

“This suggests us all to pause and not over-claim what should be done in difficult moral dilemmas; our

judgment could very well change, once we expand the context to acknowledge additional consequences,” says Professor Barak-Corren.

These findings come from a set of studies across 1,163 people and was published in the journal Management Science.

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